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Inside Islam, a woman's roar

Wazhma Frogh, an Afghan, uses her religion to press for women's rights – and development agencies take note.

By Jill Carroll | Staff writer of The Christian Science Monitor

Just hours after Wazhma Frogh arrived in an isolated, conservative district in northeastern Afghanistan in 2002, the local mullah was preaching to his congregation to kill her. Ms. Frogh was meddling with their women with her plan to start a literacy program, he told the assembly.

As she walked past the mosque during noon prayers, his words caught her ear. Shocked, she marched straight into the mosque. In a flowing black chador that left her face uncovered, she strode past the male worshipers and faced the mullah. Trembling inside, she challenged him.

"Mullah, give me five minutes," she recalls saying. "I will tell you something, and after that if you want to say I am an infidel and I am a threat to you, just kill me."

She then rattled off five Koranic verses – in both Arabic and the local Dari language – that extol the virtues of education, tolerance, and not harming others. She criticized local practices of allowing men to use Islam to justify beating their wives, betrothing young girls, and denying women an education.

The room was silent. All eyes were on Frogh and the mullah. Then the mullah rested his hand on her head.

"God bless you, my daughter," he said.

With that, Frogh won permission to start the literacy program that later helped women from Badakhshan Province participate in local government and run for the national assembly.

Where rigid interpretations of Islam relegate women to second-class status, Frogh uses rhetorical jujitsu to turn religious arguments on their heads and win women's rights. Her steely determination has earned her attention in Washington.

"In a country where religion is so important to people, we need to understand the religion," she says. Arguments based on principles of universal human rights or on what international conventions say don't persuade many Afghans to support reforms, she says. "[M]y experience in the last 10 years is this does not matter to the people in Afghanistan," she says. Only religious arguments hold sway.

The international development field has lately seen more of that approach, says Rachel McCleary, a fellow at the Center for International Development at Harvard. In the 1960s and '70s, foreign aid became more secularized, but now religious groups are a growing presence in international development work, says Ms. McCleary.

Frogh is like a number of Islamic scholars – from the United States to Yemen – who are using religious jurisprudence to argue that women have greater rights under Islam, convince leaders in Muslim communities to make reforms, or even turn around extremists who use Islam to justify violence. As an Afghan Muslim, Frogh is in the best position to persuade other Afghan Muslims to support her various projects, experts say.

"The fact [that] this woman is from within, and from the culture and society is much more powerful and salient than if a woman from outside said the same thing," says Eileen Babbitt, professor of International Conflict Management Practice at Tufts University's Fletcher School of Law and Diplomacy.

The power of religion

Indeed, Frogh believes so deeply in the power of religious arguments to bring reforms, she plans to get a graduate degree related to Islam. She says many mullahs in Afghanistan are usually only schooled by their fathers, who may be illiterate and not understand the Koran's original Arabic, even if they have memorized it. Her breadth of religious knowledge is key to persuading local religious leaders.

"My goal is to really represent Islam. It's not a religion that oppresses women," Frogh says. "Of course it's very risky. I may lose my life during this process, but if I am able to open a door for rights for one woman, then it is worth it."

She has worked for various humanitarian and development agencies to give women greater rights and education in Afghanistan. Now she works for the Canadian International Development Agency in Afghanistan, consulting on the suitability of projects there, implementing a gender-equity policy, and conducting feasibility studies and other preparations for new projects.

Changing men's perceptions

The mullah in Badakhshan Province is one of many men she persuaded to change with regard to their ideas about women. The first was her father. When her wealthy family fled upheaval in Afghanistan in the 1990s for Pakistan, her father, a rigid former Army officer, had a hard time supporting the family.

Frogh, then in eighth grade, thought of a way to help. She offered her landlord's children tutoring in exchange for cheaper rent.

"It made a difference in the way my father perceived me," Frogh says. "He thought women are consumers [who could] never be providers." He even began to consult her on family decisions.

"Because I was able to have that status in the family, it got me thinking. I could be a lawyer and help other people," she recalls. Even as a child, injustice needled her. She resented the fact that women ate in the kitchen while men dined in the living room. Girls swept the yard, but boys played in it.

Her nation's future: hopeful, tenuous

At the age most American teenagers are learning to drive, Frogh crouched at night on the family's toilet in Pakistan studying English. Only there could she turn on a light without disturbing anyone in their one-room home.

Now, not yet 30, she has President Bush's attention. In February she and women from three other countries met with Washington policymakers and aid donors to discuss women and security. The president made a surprise appearance during the group's meeting with the first lady. With her usual directness, Frogh described Afghanistan's future to the president as hopeful but tenuous.

"There is not justice," she recalls telling Mr. Bush. "The Taliban is very much all over the country. Those [who] have violated human rights, they are the ones in the government." Frogh's solution: After her studies, aim high. "I want to be chief justice."

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